

IN FOUR LANGUAGES, NOT INCLUDING COWBOY

According to the government, the population of our Kansas town is sixty, but no one's been born here in a decade, and with the old-timers moving out to the cemetery at the rate of several each year, I'm pretty certain the census figure is a bit glorified.

Sad to say, even the post office closed a dozen years ago, although not without a fight. Our only remaining business these days is a bar & grill. A lot may change, as we sometimes say, but people still need to eat.

Back in 1880, the population of our county was twice what it is today. Now we fit the definition of *frontier*, with not quite four humans to a square mile. By contrast, two-thousand-five-hundred or so bodies are crammed in the same amount of space in Wichita, and New York City has over ten times that sum. There's a lot of elbowroom out here. Most of us prefer it that way.

This is our story, but it could sound like your town's story, too, if you live in a rural area. At least, it might sound familiar until I get to the part about the opera. Anyway, this one struggling business is all we have left of what was once a host of thriving ventures: hotel, bank, newspaper, hardware & implement, gas station, shoe repair, barbershop, jeweler, and even a canary breeder who shipped her tiny livestock all over the continent until a fire in her kitchen consumed the house and a hundred songbirds in 1929. But that's another story.

Call this joint *The Wagon Wheel*, *The Rusty Spur*, or whatever you like, but when the doors closed and a hand-lettered *For Sale* sign faded forlornly in the sun for nearly a year, you could just as well have called it *The Last Chance*. We deeply felt the loss. There's no other place less than fifteen miles in any direction to wet your whistle, catch up on gossip, or find someone to loan you a posthole digger because somebody else borrowed yours.

I wasn't the only one relieved to see the roadhouse reopen under new ownership around Labor Day. I vowed to do my part to keep it solvent by stopping in for a meal once a week. As we'd discovered in its absence, this modest enterprise is more than a place to eat; it is a vital hub in the wheel of our community.

Maybe you'll recognize the place, or know a similar eatery. The building, a former filling station, dates to the 1920s. We joke that you can still get gas there; it just won't get you very far down the road. About ten years ago, the facilities were still out back (no flushing required), but a carpenter handy with a shoehorn has since slipped a pair indoors (so small you have to leave the room to change your mind) without sacrificing space for dining or pool playing. The pub's décor includes an ever-changing bulletin board, assorted rodeo photographs, and a sign perpetually promising *Free Beer Tomorrow*.

In winter, you'll want a table near the old gas stove, since *airtight* or *shipshape* would never be used in a sentence describing the structure; her floors and walls slope and sag like the aging matron she is. Despite chronic draftiness, the well-seasoned establishment retains the scented layers of its past: old smoke, stale hops, pungent pickles and onions, and grease of varying vintage and viscosity.

You can request a menu, but after studying it once, you probably won't need one again. Do be careful what you ask for. Vegetarians might wish to stay in the car and eat energy bars; this is beef country, and I cannot promise safe passage. Visitors who order a glass of wine are likely to be told (and I quote the woman who owns the place), "Out here we spell chardonnay B-u-d."

You can dependably get burgers or chicken fingers, fries or onion rings, and soft drinks or beer most any day of the week. Tuesday nights you can also enjoy fried chicken, but you might have to wait half an hour for the cook to get a good scald on it. All day Thursday, there's

the option of Mexican food with homemade salsa. On Friday evenings, you can live large and treat your date to a rib-eye steak with all the trimmings. The only dessert option is a candy bar. Good food, no frills.

A fellow who does some time behind the bar and in front of the grill (I'll call him Dusty to protect what innocence he may have left) is a retired rodeo cowboy and part-time welder of horse and cowboy silhouettes, slightly-larger-than-life-size, which is also the size of story he tells. Dusty functions as a tall tale and joke machine with a topical indexing system. As he himself says, "I've never forgotten a single story I've ever heard." Lord, help us all. He also stands in for a jukebox, a role upon which he once remarked, after an unsolicited rendition of *The Bonny Scotsman* sung right at our table, "I don't have talent, but I've got heart." Amen to both.

Every so often you might hear other live music (pretty much whoever drops in and can carry a tune will be allowed to perform), but all the offerings are of a similar type, which is to say, nothing highfalutin, just good tunes to set your foot to tapping.

Given all this, you might imagine the skepticism with which I greeted Dusty's question on a Friday night in mid-December: "Will you be coming in tomorrow evening for the opera singer?" I could only guess that the query referred to an *opry* singer, as in *Grand Old Opry*, or else I needed taller boots for the story yet to come. I cannot recall exactly how I expressed my disbelief, but Dusty affected a wounded expression and grabbed a flyer from the bar. "Here," he said, as he threw the sheet down with a flourish, "look at this, since you obviously don't believe me." Sure enough, the advertisement touted *A Night of Classical Music*. This unlikely opportunity was as hard to imagine as it was impossible to pass up.

When I stop in for a meal, I'm lucky to see two other patrons, maybe five on a busy day. When I arrived the next night, I counted over twenty faces, with the crowd swelling to thirty by

evening's end. Printed programs adorned each table, promising a repertoire of songs in Italian, French, German and English: four languages, not including cowboy.

Given the caliber of the evening's selections, Dusty's opening act seemed the ultimate in musical incongruity (his motto: *play only happy and funny songs; people are usually sad enough when they come in a bar*). Try picturing a gent whose legs permanently retain the shape of a Brahma bull's ample back. Visualize him with a guitar draped across an untucked pearl-button shirt, mustache slightly askew and a seed-cap-sculpted hairdo. Now, imagine him singing something like *Come After Breakfast, Bring Your Lunch, and Leave Before Supper* while in the wings a tall, striking woman impeccably outfitted in a black velvet skirt and jacket stands waiting to launch into a 15th century Italian air, *Vittoria, mio core!*

Frankly, incongruities popped up all over the place as the opera singer took the stage, which is a shameless euphemism for a dining area one step above the rest of the room. Here hangs the musty collection of hunting trophies Dusty bought at auction and arranged in such a way that the evening's formally-clad soloist appeared to have two ten-point bucks as unlikely backup singers.

Four women over retirement age were occupying a nearby booth for a *Girls' Night Out* involving beer, burgers and lively conversation among the marginally hard of hearing. I don't believe these gals had come for the classical music, nor did they let it thwart their intentions. Occasionally one of them appeared fleetingly conscious of the concert in progress and shushed her boisterous companions. Moments later, the same woman soared to new heights of volume, her earthy commentary providing an off-key counterpoint to the melody.

One large table accommodated a conspicuously well dressed contingent enjoying dinner, with plans to gather elsewhere after the concert for champagne and chocolate. It is no secret that this group's members, most of whom emigrated here from more prosperous locales, believe the

county would benefit from a bit more culture, so naturally they seemed positively gleeful about the opera singer. The natives of this place, on the other hand, are *live and let live* sorts who do not press the local agenda; it matters not to them whether the newcomers know a damn thing about cattle and grass. And, by the way, as some of us will gladly tell you, just because we live in the country doesn't mean we need a dose of so-called culture as a vaccination against terminal stupidity, or as one local rancher likes to say in defense of the rural lifestyle: *there is absolutely nothing wrong with the culture of agriculture.*

Lined up at the bar were a few cowhands clearly in attendance for the ale rather than the arias. Despite their relative disinterest in the goings-on of *A Night of Classical Music*, a few ears seemed to lift slightly above beer-level at a perky rendition of *The Lass from the Low Countree*, which sounded marginally more like a cowboy song. At least it was in some version of English and less perplexing than, say, *Vergin tutto amor*.

Two women from the county seat fifteen miles up the road dressed for the occasion in fancy ball gowns and elaborately feathered hats. They descended upon the room with dramatic gestures and supercilious glances through fluttering lashes. In lieu of opera glasses, they made much ado of peering through a pair of binoculars to see the musician, who was within spitting distance of their table. Their fake accents wavered between British and French and not infrequently lapsed into the local twang. These two had also, for heaven only knows what reason, applied temporary tattoos to shoulders and other areas made available by their daring décolletage. Oh, and speaking of incongruity, they wore tennis shoes under their gowns, a nod to Kansas practicality, since it was a chilly night and consequently drafty in the eighty-some-year-old building. When asked if she wasn't a bit cold in a sleeveless gown, the more blunt-spoken of the two replied with a hearty laugh, "Are you kidding? When you're this fat, you don't get cold."

I can almost hear you saying *yes, yes, yes, this is all very interesting, but how did an opera singer end up performing in a Podunk, Kansas bar & grill?* Well, it turns out the evening's entertainer, who has a strong, lovely voice and a great deal of poise, is the bar-owner's younger sister. This explains the connection; however, the *motivation* for booking an engagement at our rural outpost remains a mystery. I can't quite imagine the sisters sitting around one night and out of the blue one says to the other, *Well, I own a bar and you sing opera...why, it's a match made in heaven!*

However unlikely the pairing of music with venue, I'd say it was a surprising success. When I dropped in a week later, I raved to the owner about how much I enjoyed the concert. "Well," said she, a woman of relatively few words, "I think she'll be back next year."

Who'da thunk it? Then again, backwater Kansas towns are famous for sustaining their vitality with odd and creative traditions: haybale decorating, twine collecting, pancake racing, even grasshopper and broomweed festivals.

New acquaintances often wonder what in the world possesses me to make my abode so far from what they think of as civilization. Now I'm looking forward to the next person who asks me why I live in rural Kansas so I can say, *for the opera, of course.*